

Message Text

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ACTION SS-25

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S E C R E T JERUSALEM 0326

EXDIS

E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PBOR, PFOR, IS, JO, EG, XF
SUBJ: EGYPTIAN CONTACTS WITH WEST BANK MODERATES

REF: JERUSALEM 159

1. NOFORN

2. BEFORE PEACE TALKS BETWEEN THE EGYPTIANS AND
ISRAELIS ABORTED JANUARY 18, MEMBERS OF THE EGYPTIAN
DELEGATION MET ON JANUARY 17 AND 18 IN EAST JERUSALEM
WITH WEST BANK MODERATES TO DISCUSS A POSSIBLE ROLE
FOR THEM IN ME PEACE NGOTIATIONS. (COMMENT:
THESE PRIVATE MEETINGS WERE ACCOMPANIED BY PUBLIC
OVERTURES TO REASSURE WEST BANK PALESTINIANS. (REFTEL)).

3. OUR READOUT OF THE SESSIONS WAS SUPPLIED BY JAMIL
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HAMMAD, A LOCAL JOURNALIST, WHO HELPED ARRANGE THEM.
ANOTHER PARTICIPANT, AZIZ SHIHEDEH OF RAMALLAH, CONFIRMED
THAT THE MEETINGS TOOK PLACE, BUT WOULD SPEAK ONLY
GENERALLY OF WHAT WAS DISCUSSED.

4. EGYPTIAN PARTICIPANTS WERE OSMAN AL BAZ, UNDER-
SECRETARY OF THE MINISTRY OF FOREIGN AFFAIRS, AND A

SECOND UNIDENTIFIED DELEGATE. PALESTINIAN PARTICIPANTS, AT ONE MEETING OR THE OTHER, WERE: HAMMAD, SHIHEDEH, MAHMUD ABU ZALAF, EDITOR AND PUBLISHER OF "AL QUDS" AND DR. HAMDI TAJI AL FARUKI OF RAMALLAH. THE ISRAELIS WERE AWARE THE MEETINGS TOOK PLACE, BUT WERE NOT PRESENT.

5. AL BAZ WAS INTERESTED IN THE PLO'S WEST BANK CONNECTIONS AND SUGGESTED THAT IT MIGHT BE HELPFUL IF A DELEGATION FROM THE WEST BANK MET WITH PLO LEADERS IN A THIRD COUNTRY TO ATTEMPT TO MODERATE THE PLO LINE OPPOSING THE SADAT PEACE INITIATIVE. AL BAZ ADMITTED THAT THE WEST BANK PALESTINIANS WHO HAD ALREADY VISITED ISMALIA AND EXPRESSED SUPPORT FOR SADAT COULD NOT BE CONSIDERED REPRESENTATIVE. BUT, HE BELIEVED REPRESENTATIVE MODERATES COULD BE FOUND WHO WERE NOT SLAVISH ADHERENTS TO THE PLO LINE.

6. SHIHEDEH SUGGESTED THAT A WEST BANK DELEGATION MEET THE PLO IN SAUDI ARABIA WHERE THE SAUDIS COULD ADD THEIR WEIGHT TO THE ATTEMPT. OTHERS DISAGREED ON THE GROUNDS THAT THE SAUDIS WERE AS LIKELY TO SUPPORT THE PLO AND PRESSURE THE WEST BANKERS AS NOT. TUNISIA WAS SUGGESTED AS ALTERNATE, NEUTRAL TERRITORY.

7. THE IDEA OF A WEST BANK GROUP AS AN ALTERNATE NEGOTIATOR ALSO SURFACED. SHIHEDEH SUGGESTED THAT THE
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PLOOJS MANDATE TO REPRESENT THE PALESTINIANS BE TRANSFERRED THROUGH AN ARAB LEAGUE RESOLUTION. OTHERS (NOT CLEAR IF EGYPTIAN OR NOT) EXPRESSED SKEPTICISM THAT THE ARAB LEAGUE COULD BE SO MANIPULATED AND CONCERN THAT AN ATTEMPT TO DO SO MIGHT ONLY CAUSE RECRIMINATION.

8. AL BAZ ASKED THE PALESTINIANS WHAT THEY THOUGHT OF THE BEGIN PLAN. THEY RESPONDED THAT THEY DID NOT FEEL IT WAS A SUITABLE BASIS FOR NEGOTIATIONS. THE EGYPTIANS, FOR THEIR PART, SEEMED TO TAKE THE PLAN SERIOUSLY AND COMMENTED THAT IT WAS, IN ANY CASE, THE ONLY THING ON THE TABLE. IT WAS DECIDED TO CONTINUE AND EXPAND CONTACTS, BUT THIS WAS MADE IMPOSSIBLE BY THE INTERRUPTION OF PEACE TALKS.

9. IN TALKS WITH CONGEN OFFICER, HAMMAD COMMENTED THAT THE EGYPTIANS SEEMED INTERESTED IN GETTING A FEEL FOR WEST BANK POLITICS. THEY APPRECIATED THAT THE DELEGATIONS TO EGYPT WERE NOT REALLY REPRESENTATIVE OF THE WEST BANK PALESTINIANS, BUT THEY APPARENTLY WERE DISATISFIED WITH REPORTS THEY HAD RECEIVED FROM TRADITIONAL CONTACTS LIKE HIKMAT AL MASRI BECAUSE THEY FELT THESE

REPORTS DID NOT INCLUDE A BROAD ENOUGH SPECTRUM OF WEST BANK OPINION. (COMMENT: PRESUMABLY, THE EGYPTIANS WERE ESPECIALLY INTERESTED IN THE MODERATE MINORITY. ALSO, AL MASRI WAS APPARENTLY IN THE EGYPTIAN DOG HOUSE FOR FENCE SITTING AND FOR DISCOURAGING ABDULRA'OUF AL FARIS FROM GOING TO CAIRO TO EXPRESS SUPPORT. END COMMENT).

10. ACCORDING TO HAMMAD, PALESTINIANS PRESENT SHARED AN INTEREST IN NOT BEING LEFT ALTOGETHER OUT OF PEACE TALKS AND INSURING A MORE-OR-LESS INDEPENDENT STAND SHOULD KING HUSSEIN JOIN. THESE PALESTINIANS FELT THAT BOTH EGYPT AND THE US COULD SERVE AS A USEFUL COUNTER-WEIGHT TO BOTH THE ISRAELIS AND JORDANIANS. HAMMAD FELT SADAT HAS INVESTED TOO MUCH IN HIS INITIATIVE TO
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TURN BACK AND AN AGREEMENT SEPARATE OR OTHERWISE IS ULTIMATELY PROBABLE.

11. IN CONVERSATION WITH CONGEN OFFICER, SHIHEDEH EXPRESSED HIS CONCERN THAT BEGIN WOULD NEVER BRING HIMSELF TO MAKING ADEQUATE COMPROMISES ON THE WEST BANK TO ALLOW FOR AN OVERALL SETTLEMENT. HOWEVER, SHIHEDEH NOTED, BEGIN WAS A SICK MAN AND MIGHT NOT LIVE LONG. JERUSALEM WOULD BE THE REAL STICKING POINT, AND SHIHEDEH SAID, HE WAS PREPARING A PROPOSAL ON THAT ISSUE.

12. COMMENT: AL BAZ' PALESTINIAN CONTACTS, WHILE NOT REPRESENTATIVE OF WEST BANK POPULAR OPINION, ARE RESPECTED AND INFLUENTIAL. SHIHEDEH AND HAMMAD, AT LEAST, ARE RELATIVELY INDEPENDENT OF JORDAN AND NOT MERELY STALKING

HORSES FOR THE KING. EGYPTIAN COMMENTS ON THE BEGIN PLAN MAY HAVE BEEN INTENDED TO SOBER WEST BANKERS INTO SOME HARD THINKING ON JUST EXACTLY WHAT ARE PALESTINIAN MINIMAL DEMANDS IN A TRANSITION PERIOD.
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